



Justice Africa Sudan Briefing

Sudan National Dialogue

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Policy Paper: A National Dialogue for Sudan's Renewal

Executive Summary

Sudan is facing an unprecedented crisis marked by militarized politics, state fragmentation, economic collapse, and social disintegration. A credible national dialogue is urgently required to address the structural issues that have hindered Sudan's progress since independence. This policy paper outlines the core challenges, proposes a national dialogue framework, and identifies priority actions for political, civil society, and regional stakeholders.

Background and Problem Statement

Sudan has undergone five major transitional periods since 1956, all of which collapsed due to military intervention, elite fragmentation, and the absence of inclusive constitutional processes. The ongoing SAF–RSF war has deepened state collapse, displaced over 13 million people, and destroyed essential services. Sudan's governance crisis is rooted in structural issues that must be addressed holistically

Sudan's national dialogue must confront a set of deep, long-standing structural problems that have consistently hindered the country's social, economic, and political progress since independence. Central among these challenges is the repeated failure of Sudan's political elites to agree on a permanent constitution a failure rooted in militarized politics, exclusionary governance, and recurring cycles of conflict. These dynamics have

prevented the emergence of stable institutions, undermined democratic transitions, and contributed to chronic national fragmentation.

Any successful national dialogue requires a conducive environment and essential preconditions to ensure meaningful participation and genuine outcomes. In the current context of active fighting, mass displacement, humanitarian distress, and heightened ethnic, tribal, and political polarization, launching a dialogue without these prerequisites would almost certainly lead to failure. Sudan's recent history illustrates this clearly. The 2014 National Dialogue initiated by former President Omar al-Bashir lacked inclusivity, transparency, and public trust. It was widely perceived as a political exercise designed to prolong his time in power rather than a sincere attempt to resolve national crises. Ultimately, it failed to address Sudan's structural challenges and did not prevent the popular uprising that removed him from office in 2019.

Learning from these experiences, Sudan's future dialogue efforts must be grounded in genuine political will, broad societal participation, and a secure environment that enables honest engagement. Only under such conditions can Sudan begin to address the root causes of its governance failures and move toward a permanent constitutional order capable of supporting peace, stability, and national renewal.

First: Why Sudan Has Failed to Adopt a Permanent Constitution Since 1956

Sudan's Constitutional Failures

Sudan's constitutional failures are not accidental they are the product of elite competition, military dominance, and the absence of an inclusive national consensus. Since independence, political leaders have repeatedly undermined constitutional processes, contributing directly to cycles of conflict, state fragmentation, and institutional collapse.

- **Betrayal of early political commitments:** At independence, Sudan's political elites failed to honour their promise to grant South Sudan a federal system of governance. This breach of trust triggered the first post-independence civil war, which lasted more than a decade and ended with the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972. The agreement was later violated by President Jaafar Nimeiri in 1983, reigniting the second civil war. That conflict continued until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and ultimately led to South Sudan's secession in July 2011.
- **Repeated military coups:** Sudan's constitutional development has been repeatedly interrupted by military coups, each replacing civilian frameworks with decrees or transitional charters. This entrenched militarized politics and prevented the emergence of stable constitutional institutions.

- **Elite-driven constitutional bargaining:** Political elites have historically approached constitution-making as a power-sharing negotiation rather than a national process grounded in broad public participation. As a result, constitutional texts reflected elite interests rather than a shared national vision.
- **Manipulation and suspension of constitutions:** Successive governments, particularly authoritarian regimes such as the Inghaz era (1989), frequently amended, suspended, or ignored constitutional provisions to consolidate power and suppress political competition.
- **Disrespect for constitutional norms even under democracy:** Even during periods of elected civilian rule, political elites violated constitutional principles for example, the dissolution of the Communist Party in 1968, which contravened constitutional guarantees of political freedoms.
- **Civil wars and regional marginalization:** Prolonged conflicts and systematic marginalization of peripheral regions prevented nationwide participation in constitution-making processes, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and injustice.
- **Lack of trust among political actors:** Deep mistrust between Sudan's political forces made long-term agreements impossible. Constitutional settlements were routinely undermined by actors seeking short-term advantage.
- **Dismantling of legal guardrails:** Over time, legal and institutional safeguards were eroded, creating a pattern in which constitutional collapse led directly to state collapse. Without credible institutions to enforce constitutional norms, Sudan remained vulnerable to authoritarianism and conflict

Second: Structural Issues Hindering Sudan's Social, Economic, and Political Progress

A. Conflict as the Central Constraint on Sudan's Development

Conflict remains the single most binding constraint on Sudan's social, economic, and political development. Since independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced only 11 years of relative peace — during the period of the Addis Ababa Agreement (1972–1983). For the remaining six decades, the country has been engulfed in civil wars driven largely by the refusal of central political elites to recognize and accommodate the basic rights and governance demands of marginalized populations in South Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and later the Darfur region. These long-standing grievances created a cycle of rebellion, repression, and fragmentation that has shaped Sudan's modern history.

The current war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has deepened this crisis. More than 13 million people have been displaced, making Sudan one of the world's largest displacement emergencies. Infrastructure has been destroyed, markets have collapsed, and essential services — including health, education, water, and electricity have deteriorated or ceased to function entirely.

Armed groups and militias now control significant portions of the country, undermining national governance and eroding the authority of state institutions. This fragmentation has created parallel systems of administration, justice, and security, further weakened national cohesion and complicated any attempt at political transition or constitutional reform.

Sudan's development trajectory cannot be separated from its conflict history.

B. Militarized Politics and Weak Civilian Institutions

Sudan's political system has been dominated by military actors for decades, creating a governance environment in which civilian authority has been consistently undermined. This militarization has shaped national politics, weakened institutions, and contributed directly to repeated constitutional failures.

- Long-standing dominance of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF): Instead of adhering to its constitutional mandate as a professional national army, the SAF evolved into a major political actor that effectively governed the country for more than 60 years. It expanded its influence into the economic sphere, operating companies involved in sectors ranging from gold mining to wheat production. Rather than focusing on protecting Sudan's borders, the SAF outsourced security responsibilities by creating and empowering multiple militias. This proliferation of armed groups contributed to widespread insecurity, weakened state authority, and entrenched militarized governance.
- Failure of transitional periods: Sudan has undergone five major transitional periods since independence, all of which collapsed due to military coups, elite fragmentation, and the absence of strong civilian institutions. Each transition was derailed before meaningful reforms could be implemented, reinforcing a cycle of instability and preventing the establishment of durable democratic governance.
- Fragile and underfunded civilian institutions: Civilian institutions remain weak, under-resourced, and highly vulnerable to political interference. Ministries, local administrations, and oversight bodies lack the autonomy, capacity, and financial stability needed to function effectively. This fragility has prevented civilian authorities from asserting leadership, delivering services, or providing checks and balances on military power.

Sudan's long history of militarized politics has produced a governance system in which civilian institutions are systematically overshadowed, constitutional processes are repeatedly interrupted, and political transitions fail to take root. Addressing this structural imbalance is essential for any credible national dialogue and for building a stable, civilian-led constitutional order.

C: Demilitarisation of Mind and Transformation of Violent Political Culture

Sudan's long history of militarized politics has shaped institutions and deeply influenced social attitudes. Many Sudanese have been conditioned to view force, armed mobilisation, and military intervention as legitimate tools for resolving political disputes. This entrenched "militarisation of the mind" has normalized violence, weakened trust in peaceful political processes, and contributed to recurring cycles of conflict.

Key Challenges

- Normalization of violence and glorification of armed struggle
- Distrust in dialogue, elections, and constitutional governance
- Youth recruitment into armed groups due to economic hardship
- Weak civic education and limited exposure to democratic values

What Demilitarisation Requires

- Civic education and democratic awareness
- Community-level peace culture initiatives
- Media strategies to counter hate speech and militarized narratives
- Youth empowerment and alternatives to armed mobilisation
- Reintegration and psychosocial support for former combatants

Demilitarising the mind is essential for breaking Sudan's cycle of violence. Without transforming attitudes and political culture, institutional reforms alone cannot deliver sustainable peace.

D.: Collapse of Civic Space

Sudan's civic space has deteriorated dramatically under the combined pressures of armed fragmentation, institutional breakdown, and severe restrictions on civil society. The absence of a unified national authority has produced a patchwork of territories controlled by different armed actors, each imposing its own administrative systems, security rules, and political conditions. This fragmentation has made it extremely difficult for civil society organisations to operate safely, consistently, or effectively.

- **Fragmented territorial control:** Large parts of Sudan are governed not by the state but by armed movements. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army North (SPLM/A-N) controls areas of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile; the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) dominate most of Darfur and parts of West Kordofan; and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM-Abdel Wahid) holds territory in parts of Darfur. This patchwork of authorities has dismantled national coherence and created parallel governance systems that undermine state legitimacy.
- **Severe restrictions and surveillance of civil society:** Civil society organisations face intense scrutiny, movement restrictions, and surveillance across all territories. Human rights defenders, journalists, and community groups operate under constant threat, with limited ability to mobilise, document violations, or deliver services. The environment is marked by fear, arbitrary interference, and shrinking operational space.
- **Arbitrary and inconsistent NGO regulations:** SAF-controlled and RSF-controlled areas impose different, often unpredictable, approval systems for NGOs. Permissions for travel, activities, or humanitarian delivery vary widely between territories and can be revoked without explanation. These inconsistent and arbitrary regulations have crippled coordinated national programming and made humanitarian access unreliable.
- **Collapse of banking and donor withdrawal:** The collapse of Sudan's banking system has severely disrupted financial transactions, staff payments, procurement, and project implementation. Many donors have suspended or reduced funding due to insecurity, governance risks, and limited access. As a result, civil society organisations struggle to maintain operations, retain staff, or deliver essential services.

Sudan's civic space has effectively disintegrated. Without restoring national authority, ensuring security, and rebuilding trust between communities and institutions, civil society cannot fulfil its essential role in peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and democratic transition

E. War Economy and Economic Underperformance

Sudan's economy has effectively transformed into a war economy, where armed groups, militias, and fragmented authorities capture and control key revenue streams. Gold, livestock, agriculture, and major trade corridors have become sources of financing for armed actors rather than engines of national development. This diversion of economic resources has deepened poverty, weakened state institutions, and accelerated national collapse.

- **Capture of economic resources by armed actors:** Armed groups and militias now dominate critical sectors of the economy. Revenues from gold mining, livestock markets, agricultural production, and cross-border trade routes are increasingly controlled by non-state actors. This has deprived the government of essential revenue, entrenched warlordism, and incentivised continued conflict.
- **Severe GDP losses and rising poverty:** Sudan suffered an estimated **US\$6.4 billion in GDP losses in 2023**, reflecting the scale of economic destruction caused by the war. Poverty levels are rising sharply, with millions of households losing access to income, markets, and basic services. The collapse of productive sectors has pushed the country toward long-term economic stagnation.
- **Human-made and natural disasters undermining agricultural production:** The combination of insecurity and poor rainfall has devastated agricultural output. In many regions, farmers cannot cultivate their land due to active fighting, displacement, or fear of attacks. This year's harvest is expected to fail, exacerbating already severe food insecurity. With **over 30 million people in need of humanitarian assistance**, the number is projected to increase even further as agricultural systems collapse.
- **Long-term stagnation without peace:** Without a cessation of hostilities and a transition toward stable governance, Sudan faces decades of economic stagnation. The war economy has replaced productive economic activity, destroyed infrastructure, and eliminated investor confidence. Peace is the single most important precondition for reversing Sudan's economic decline and restoring national development.

Sudan's economic crisis is inseparable from its conflict dynamics. Only through peace, institutional rebuilding, and the restoration of national authority can Sudan begin to recover from the profound economic damage inflicted by years of war.

F. Social Fragmentation and Erosion of National Identity

Sudan's prolonged conflicts and political instability have severely eroded national cohesion, deepened social divisions, and weakened the sense of shared identity. Inter-ethnic polarization, hate speech, and widespread atrocities have intensified mistrust between communities, making reconciliation increasingly difficult.

- **Deepening inter-ethnic polarization and mistrust:** Years of violence, targeted attacks, and hate speech have fractured relationships between communities. Atrocities committed across multiple regions have entrenched fear and resentment, undermined social harmony and weakened prospects for peaceful coexistence.

- **Communities divided along tribal, regional, and political lines:** Sudanese society is increasingly fragmented, with communities aligning themselves according to tribal, regional, or political identities. These divisions have been exacerbated by armed mobilization, displacement, and competition over resources, creating barriers to national unity and collective action.
- **Weak or absent reconciliation mechanisms:** Formal and informal reconciliation mechanisms remain weak, under-resourced, or entirely absent. Traditional conflict-resolution structures have been disrupted by war, while national institutions lack the legitimacy and capacity to facilitate meaningful dialogue. As a result, grievances remain unresolved, and cycles of revenge and retaliation persist.

Sudan's social fabric has been profoundly damaged. Rebuilding national identity will require inclusive dialogue, justice and accountability, and sustained efforts to restore trust between communities. Without addressing these deep social fractures, any political settlement will remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed conflict.

Third: What a Sudan National Dialogue Must Address

1. A Permanent, Inclusive Constitution

Sudan's future stability depends on the establishment of a permanent, inclusive constitution that reflects the aspirations of all Sudanese people rather than the interests of political elites. A credible constitutional process must be grounded in broad national participation, transparency, and genuine public ownership.

- **Broad national participation, not elite bargaining:** The constitution must be developed through an inclusive, nationwide process that engages communities across all regions, including historically marginalized groups. Elite driven negotiations have repeatedly failed; only a participatory approach can produce a legitimate and durable constitutional settlement.
- **Core constitutional guarantees:** A permanent constitution must enshrine fundamental principles essential for democratic governance and long-term stability, including:
 - o civilian supremacy over all state institutions, particularly the security sector
 - o separation of powers to prevent authoritarian consolidation
 - o protection of rights, including political, civil, and socio-economic rights
 - o decentralization that balances regional demands and ensures equitable representation and resource distribution

- **Protection of constitutional guardrails:** Constitutional safeguards must be designed to prevent manipulation, suspension, or unilateral amendment. Strong institutions, independent courts, and clear enforcement mechanisms are essential to ensure that constitutional norms cannot be undermined by political actors or military authorities.

A permanent, inclusive constitution is the foundation for rebuilding Sudan's governance system, restoring national unity, and preventing future cycles of conflict and authoritarianism.

. 2. Ending Militarized Politics

Sudan cannot achieve lasting stability through temporary political compromises or elite-driven arrangements. What the country requires is a historic national settlement that decisively ends militarized politics and establishes a civilian-led constitutional order. Without such a transformation, any dialogue or transition process will remain vulnerable to manipulation, mistrust, and renewed conflict.

- **A historic settlement, not short-term deals:** Sudan's past transitions have repeatedly collapsed because they relied on fragile political bargains rather than structural reforms. Ending militarized politics requires a comprehensive national agreement that redefines the role of the security sector, strengthens civilian authority, and prevents future coups.
- **Commitment of all armed actors to a civilian-led transition:** All armed groups including SAF, RSF, and other movements — must commit to a civilian-led political process. Without unified support for civilian authority, constitutional reforms and national dialogue efforts will lack credibility and public trust.
- **Security sector reform and unification of armed forces:** Sudan needs a robust security sector reform (SSR) process that unifies SAF, RSF, and other armed groups into a professional, non-politicized national army. This includes demobilization, integration, clear command structures, and strict civilian oversight. A unified army is essential for restoring national sovereignty, ending militia rule, and preventing future fragmentation.
- **Public mistrust rooted in past violations:** Many Sudanese actors remain deeply sceptical of national dialogue efforts due to the continued influence of figures associated with the former National Congress Party (NCP) regime. Under the chairmanship of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, SAF retains significant political control. His record including the October 25, 2021, military takeover that violated the Constitutional Declaration has eroded public confidence. As a result, large segments of Sudanese society fear that a national dialogue process conducted under current conditions may lack transparency and may be perceived as a

pathway to legitimizing General Burhan's political ambitions or securing external recognition.

Ending militarized politics is therefore not only a structural requirement but also a trust-building imperative. Sudan's future depends on a transition that is genuinely civilian-led, transparent, and free from the influence of actors who have historically undermined constitutional processes.

3. Rebuilding Civic Space

Rebuilding Sudan's civic space is essential for restoring national resilience, strengthening democratic participation, and enabling communities to contribute meaningfully to recovery and peacebuilding. After years of fragmentation, repression, and conflict, civil society must be empowered to operate freely, safely, and nationwide.

- **Nationwide freedom of operation for civil society:** Civil society organisations must be able to function across all regions of Sudan without political interference, security restrictions, or arbitrary administrative barriers. A revitalized civic space requires legal protections, secure access, and the removal of parallel approval systems imposed by armed actors.
- **Integrating community-led response mechanisms into national recovery:** Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), local mutual aid networks, and grassroots volunteer groups have played a critical role in sustaining communities throughout the conflict. These community-driven structures should be formally recognised and integrated into national recovery and reconstruction plans. Their local knowledge, rapid mobilisation capacity, and trusted presence make them indispensable partners in humanitarian delivery, early recovery, and social cohesion efforts.
- **Rebuilding civic space is not only a governance priority — it is a foundation for national healing, inclusive dialogue, and long-term stability.** Empowering civil society will help restore trust, strengthen accountability, and ensure that Sudan's recovery is shaped by the voices of its people.

4. Addressing Post-Conflict Social Challenges

Sudan's recovery will depend on its ability to address the profound social consequences of war. Decades of conflict, displacement, and atrocities have deeply damaged community relations, weakened social cohesion, and created widespread trauma. A comprehensive post-conflict strategy must prioritize human recovery alongside political and economic reconstruction.

- **Repatriation and reintegration of millions of IDPs and refugees:** Sudan faces one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees will require safe, voluntary, and dignified return or

resettlement. This process must include access to land, housing, livelihoods, documentation, and basic services. Reintegration must be community-based to prevent renewed tensions and ensure long-term stability.

- **Community reconciliation to repair inter-tribal and inter-ethnic relations:** Years of violence have fractured relationships between communities, creating deep mistrust and resentment. Effective reconciliation requires inclusive dialogue, local peace committees, traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, and national support structures. Rebuilding trust is essential for preventing revenge cycles and restoring social cohesion.
- **Trauma healing and transitional justice mechanisms:** Widespread trauma, including psychological harm, sexual violence, and exposure to atrocities, demands a national approach to healing. Transitional justice mechanisms — truth-telling, accountability processes, reparations, and memorialization — are critical for acknowledging suffering and preventing impunity. Community-based psychosocial support must be integrated into recovery plans to help individuals and families rebuild their lives.

Addressing Sudan's post-conflict social challenges is fundamental to achieving sustainable peace. Without healing, reconciliation, and reintegration, political settlements will remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed conflict.

5. Justice and Accountability

Justice and accountability are essential pillars for achieving sustainable peace in Sudan. Decades of impunity have enabled cycles of violence, atrocities, and political manipulation. A credible transition must confront past violations, ensure accountability for current crimes, and establish mechanisms that prevent future abuses.

- **Ending impunity as a foundation for peace:** Sudan cannot move toward stability without dismantling the entrenched culture of impunity. Perpetrators of grave human rights violations regardless of affiliation must face justice. Accountability is both a moral obligation and a practical requirement for breaking the cycle of conflict.
- **Investigation and prosecution of atrocities:** Atrocities committed in El Fasher and other regions must be thoroughly investigated by independent, credible bodies. Documentation, evidence preservation, and prosecution are essential to ensure justice for victims and to demonstrate that violations will no longer be tolerated. These processes must follow international standards and ensure protection for witnesses and survivors.
- **A national truth and justice process:** Sudan needs a comprehensive truth, justice, and reconciliation process that acknowledges past abuses, provides

space for victims' voices, and establishes a shared historical record. Such a process should include truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform, and clear pathways for accountability. Transitional justice mechanisms are vital for healing trauma, restoring trust, and preventing future violations.

Justice and accountability are not obstacles to peace — they are prerequisites. Without confronting past and present abuses, Sudan's political settlement will remain fragile, and the country will continue to face cycles of violence and instability.

6. Economic Reconstruction

Sudan's long-term recovery requires a decisive shift away from the war economy toward a productive, inclusive, and sustainable economic model. Rebuilding national infrastructure, restoring markets, and ensuring equitable resource distribution are essential for stabilizing livelihoods and laying the foundation for development.

- **Transition from a war economy to a productive economy:** Sudan must dismantle the systems that allow armed actors to capture economic resources and redirect national wealth toward conflict. A productive economy requires restoring state authority over key sectors, revitalizing agriculture and industry, and creating conditions that encourage investment, employment, and innovation.
- **Rebuilding infrastructure, markets, and public services:** Years of conflict have destroyed roads, bridges, electricity networks, water systems, schools, and hospitals. Reconstructing this infrastructure is essential for reconnecting communities, enabling trade, and restoring basic services. Reviving markets and supply chains will help stabilize prices, support livelihoods, and rebuild economic confidence.
- **Ensuring equitable distribution of national resources:** Sudan's future stability depends on fair and transparent management of national resources — including gold, oil, agriculture, and land. Equitable distribution must prioritize marginalized regions, address historical inequalities, and ensure that communities benefit directly from local resources. Transparent governance and anti-corruption measures are essential to prevent renewed grievances.

Economic reconstruction is not only a technical challenge it is a political and social imperative. A peaceful, inclusive Sudan requires an economy that serves its people, supports national unity, and breaks decisively from the patterns of exploitation and conflict that have defined the past.

Fourth: Dialogue Structure

5.1 Preparatory Phase (3–6 months)

- Establish an Independent Dialogue Commission (IDC) composed of respected Sudanese figures.
- Develop a dialogue roadmap, rules of procedure, and participation criteria.
- Conduct nationwide consultations (including diaspora).
- Map stakeholders: political parties, armed groups, civil society, traditional authorities, women's networks, youth movements.
- Secure regional and international guarantees (AU, IGAD, UN).

5.2 Thematic Tracks

The dialogue should be organized into five thematic tracks, each with clear outputs:

Track 1: Governance and Constitutional Reform

- System of government (parliamentary, presidential, hybrid)
- Separation of powers
- Decentralization and federalism
- Bill of Rights
- Constitutional safeguards against coups

Output: Draft constitutional principles and framework.

Track 2: Security Sector Reform and Ceasefire

- SAF–RSF integration roadmap
- Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)
- Unified national army
- Civilian oversight mechanisms

Output: Security Sector Reform (SSR) compact.

Track 3: Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

- Inter-communal reconciliation
- Return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees
- Hate speech reduction strategies
- Local peace committees

Output: National Peace and Reconciliation Charter.

Track 4: Economic Recovery and Development

- Transition from war economy
- Reconstruction priorities
- Resource governance (gold, agriculture, oil)
- Anti-corruption mechanisms

Output: National Economic Recovery Plan.

Track 5: Justice, Accountability, and Transitional Justice

- Hybrid justice mechanisms
- Truth-telling processes
- Reparations for victims
- Accountability for atrocities

Output: Transitional Justice Roadmap.

6. Implementation and Follow-Up Mechanisms

6.1 National Accord Document

All outputs consolidated into a National Accord, endorsed by stakeholders and guaranteed by regional bodies.

6.2 Transitional Civilian Authority

A civilian-led transitional authority mandated to:

- Implement dialogue outcomes
- Oversee constitutional drafting
- Prepare for elections (when conditions allow)

6.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

- Independent M&E body with civil society representation
- Quarterly progress reports
- Public scorecards for transparency

7. Risks and Mitigation Measures

Key Risks

- Spoilers from armed groups
- Elite capture of dialogue

- Regional interference
- Humanitarian collapse undermining participation

Mitigation

- Strong regional guarantees
- Transparent selection of delegates
- Protection mechanisms for civil society
- Parallel humanitarian support plans

8. Conclusion

Sudan's future depends on a national dialogue that is inclusive, civilian-led, and rooted in justice. This framework provides a structured pathway to address long-standing governance failures, rebuild national unity, and establish a permanent constitutional order.

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